The Role of Psychology and Culture in Teaching

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> "The successful educator must be one who understands the complexities of the teaching-learning process and can draw upon this knowledge to act in ways which empower learners both within and beyond the classsroom situation." (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 5)

This is true for any teacher of any subject. Understanding complexities of the teaching and learning process and empowering learners are great feats for they imply that to be a successful educator one must understand or attempt to understand why humans behave the way they do, why they choose to learn or not to learn, and what motivates people. Empowering learners requires an understanding of the human psyche, and for the teacher in a foreign country, cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the particular culture. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Japan who are new to the field but have experience in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) soon become aware that teaching EFL poses some unique challenges. Most notably, student motivation and course and learner goals differ between EFL and ESL, and these factors may require the teacher to adapt different teaching strategies to the new situation. To do this, teachers must bring to the EFL classroom an understanding of the students' culture, of the human psyche, and a combination of the two.

Some Visiting Faculty Members (VFMs) report that low student motivation for learning English poses a constraint for teachers. Different ways of thinking between the foreign teachers and the Japanese students make teaching challenging (Andersen, 1997). Thinking and rhetorical structure of logic may also be different for each individual but are connected to the target language (TL) and culture too. Thus, I strongly feel that it is not the aim of the FE program and of VFMs to change students' ways of thinking or to change student behavior to suit the teacher. It is more important for the instructor to understand and accept the students for who they are; it is the instructor who must adapt to the new teaching situation while helping students adapt to a new and unfamiliar style of teaching. In this way, if the students decide to change their behavior, the decision will be their own. However, it is often the behavioral expectations of the teacher, when not met, that frustrate the teacher. For example, teachers who expect their Japanese students to behave like students from their own country may be frustrated because students' cultural upbringing affects their classroom behavior.

Michael Kearney, a former Asia University (AU) VFM who had great success teaching beginning-level FE students, suggests, "With some knowledge of the society they are immersed in, language teachers should be able to proceed smoothly with classes and perhaps use situations of cultural difference to enhance their lessons" (Kearney, 1995, p. 67). However, knowledge of the Japanese society in which we are immersed will help VFMs to teach effectively only if instructors make a conscious effort not to judge cultural behavior of their own culture as being in any way better or worse than the target culture behavior. In Japan, it is generally not customary for students to speak out in class unless they are called upon by the instructor whereas in the US such behavior is encouraged and expected. Cultures are different, and if we can nonjudgementally embrace these differences, then perhaps teaching will be able to "proceed smoothly."

This essay aims to outline some concepts from the field of psychology and to show how they are intrinsic to language teaching and intercultural communication. These concepts include *amae*, mindfulness, communication strategies, and mediation. I will also touch on some of the specific challenges that Japanese university freshmen encounter and how these challenges may be reflected in the classroom and toward learning English.

Amae

In his groundbreaking work, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, Japanese psychologist Takeo Doi defines the Japanese term *amae* as the feelings that infants harbor toward their mother--"dependence, the desire to be passively loved, the unwillingness to be separated from the warm, mother-child circle and cast into a world of objective reality" (Doi, 1971, p. 7). *Amae* describes the child who desires "to be enveloped in an indulgent love" and by extension

refers to the same behavior, whether unconscious or conscious, in the adult (Doi, 1971, p. 7). The person exhibiting *amae* is often seeking the dependency of others, and according to Doi, for Japanese these feelings are prolonged into and diffused throughout adult life. Though all societies exhibit *amae*, for Japanese the awareness of this feeling is heightened, and this in turn affects Japanese behavior (Kearney, 1995). Sociologist T. S. Lebra says that "When two persons are unequal in status or power, the inferior becomes dependent upon the superior for help and support" (1976, p. 50). Being dependent on the superior for help and support is one expression of *amae* and can be found in many hierarchical relationships in Japanese society: employer-employee, chief-subordinate, *sempai-kohai*, parent-child, teacher-student, etc. Perhaps it is not too far off the mark to say that, when considering the implications of *amae*, our Japanese students may have some expectations for the teacher to take care of them and lead the way. The VFM can "care" for students by guiding them; this means laying appropriate schema and creating classroom activities with detailed structure that move on to free-form activities.

Doi stresses that *amae* "is a key concept for the understanding not only of the psychological makeup of the individual Japanese but of the structure of Japanese society as a whole" (p. 28). If EFL instructors understand *amae*, perhaps they will have more success and fulfillment teaching Japanese students in the classroom and in relating to their students in all facets of communication.

Mindfulness

Another concept that is important in communicative interaction in the EFL classroom is *mindfulness*. Being mindful of behavior means becoming aware of communication behavior in order to correct the tendency to misinterpret others' behavior and to communicate more effectively. For VFMs, learning how to become mindful teachers can help communication within the FE classroom. Langer (1989) points out three qualities of mindfulness:

1. creation of new categories
2. openness to new information
3. awareness of more than one perspective

The creation of new categories implies that instructors should avoid grouping their students into one broad category, such as *all Law students*. By making more distinctions within the group--sex, age, international experience, personality characteristics, leadership skills, etc.--EFL teachers can decrease these kinds of classroom stereotypes. Teachers can learn more about their students' specific skills and interests by administering a needs analysis and personal information questionnaire early in the first semester or by having students do interactive interviews or group presentations in which students tell about their similarities and differences, increasing their own mindfulness of students.

Points two and three, being open to new information and aware of more than one perspective, require communicators to focus on the process of communication (how individuals do something), and not only on the outcome. Students of a foreign language, for example, may tend to focus on the outcome--*will I make a fool of myself when I speak L2*? Teachers, too, may find acting out an example in front of the class to be embarrassing. However, Langer suggests that focusing on process--the actual interaction between those communicating--makes individuals aware (mindful) of their behavior and makes them pay attention to the situation they are in, and in turn become more open to new information and thoughtful of many views. VFM Mary Meares' intercultural communication lessons offer a good example of asking students to focus on the learning process and become aware of different perspectives (Meares, 1998). In one lesson, Meares has students practice a dialog in which student pairs receive different clues to follow as to the value of personal space. One student's cultural sense of personal space is 10 centimeters from the interlocuter, and the interlocuter's sense of personal space is 20 centimeters or more. While practicing the dialog, students chase each other around the classroom. The students enjoy this active and humorous activity, but at the same time they experience different perspectives of personal space while focusing on the process of communication. In this way, students and teachers become mindful, learn how their interpretations of messages may differ from others, and therefore understand each other better.

Communication Strategies with Japanese Students

Gudykunst and Nishida define motivation in communication as the desire to communicate appropriately and effectively (1994). In order for Japanese and North Americans to communicate effectively, Gudykunst and Nishida contend that individuals' motivation, knowledge, and skills combine with *outcomes* of their interactions to yield perceptions of competencies (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). A perception of competence means both the speaker's and interlocuter's perception of what the other is able to communicatively produce and understand. Two possible outcomes are that individuals' behavior may be perceived as appropriate and effective or inappropriate and ineffective. A student who strives to get a message across to the instructor but does not have the necessary vocabulary may use examples and body language to parlay the message. This exemplifies communication with high motivation and low vocabulary knowledge. Such a student may have a high perception of competence of him/herself, and the instructor, in understanding the intended message, will also have a high perception of competence of the student. Also, the student who feels comfortable in interacting with the instructor may possess a high sense of competence in the instructor. In this example, the outcome may be that the instructor understands what the student is trying to say, and effective communication has taken place.

Because VFMs are frequently presenting students with new information, the role of openness to new information in motivation is central. Openness to new information involves the degree to which individuals willingly seek out new information; in a class of 25 Japanese students and one native English-speaking instructor, there may be 26 different degrees of openness. A major reason that Japanese and North Americans are not motivated to communicate with each other is that it is often difficult to accurately predict the behavior of people from the other culture. Turner (1988) suggests that individuals need to trust others in the sense that, for the purposes of a given interaction, others are reliable and their responses predictable.

Students and VFMs have learned different communication rules and often follow these rules when communicating in each other's languages. A good example here is the role that silence plays in communication between cultures. In the Japanese culture, extended silence in communicative interaction between two or more people may mean that the speaker is deeply thinking about an appropriate response. For the North American, however, extended periods of silence in communication between two people, for example, 10 seconds or more, may mean that the speaker is no longer interested in the communicative exchange. In the classroom, VFMs and students often transfer these different communication rules. In my own classroom, it has often occurred that a Japanese student, when engaging in English conversation with me, goes into *deep thought*. In such a case, rather than continue speaking or rephrasing, I might give the student a few more seconds or repeat my utterance because the student may not only be transferring his/her rule of silence into the target language exchange but also may not have completely understood what I said. Other examples of differing communication rules between the Japanese culture and other cultures exist, and learning to be mindful and understanding of these differences could help VFMs smooth out any communicative rough spots in the classroom.

There is plentiful research on the role cultural and language differences play in communication challenges. But linguistic and personal similarities also play a role in bridging gaps and creating a workable group dynamic in the classroom. When people first meet, they focus on cultural differences, and this is normal because individuals first recognize cultural differences before searching for individual commonalities. "With a more explicit understanding of what we have in common and the goals we seek to attain together, the differences between us that remain would be less threatening" (Bellah et al, 1985, p. 287). Gudykunst and Nishida go on to say that recognizing similarities between communicators is critical if a relationship is to develop between Japanese and North Americans (1994). Recognizing background similarities, lifestyle similarities, attitude similarities, and value similarities allows teachers and students to overcome cultural differences and develop closer interpersonal and working relationships.

Communication with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds brings with it ambiguity. An ability to tolerate ambiguity implies an ability to deal successfully with situations when a lot of the information needed to interact effectively is unknown or unavailable. Ruben and Kealey (1979) suggest that people who have a higher tolerance for

ambiguity are more effective in completing task assignments in other cultures than people with lower tolerances, while those with low tolerance become more easily frustrated. Also, the VFM who encounters frustrated FE students may be dealing with students who are unaccustomed to ambiguous situations in the classroom, which would fit the role that *amae* plays in the teacher-student relationship. Remember that *amae* suggests that the teacher is the guide, so structured activities and well-modeled directions would benefit students who have a low tolerance for ambiguity. At the same time, VFMs with a higher tolerance for ambiguous situations will feel more confident being flexible in adapting their behavior to the situation and in improvising or teaching without a lesson plan when it is not working.

For VFMs with little experience in adapting their classroom behavior, Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) suggest that people from individualistic cultures (people from cultures that value individualism, such as the US) be cognizant of the following 12 points when interacting with people from collectivistic cultures (people from cultures that value interdependence on one another and harmony in interactions, such as Japan):

1. understand collectivists' group memberships in order to predict their behavior
2. recognize that when collectivists' group memberships change, their behavior changes, too
3. be prepared to establish vertical relationships
4. try to be cooperative with collectivists; competition is threatening
5. try to establish harmonious relationships with collectivists
6. avoid confrontation with collectivists
7. help collectivists maintain public self-image (face)
8. recognize that collectivists do not separate criticism from the person being criticized
9. collectivists value long-term relationships
10. collectivists value modesty
11. collectivists are more formal in initial interactions than individualists
12. try to understand collectivists' obligations to others.

Mediation as Teaching

Different ways of disseminating information will have different effects on learners. Japanese students are generally used to a teacher-centered style of teaching in which the teacher lectures to the class and the students are responsible to accumulate the information by listening carefully and taking notes. Many of the required university courses at AU are this lecture-style format where the teacher is the disseminator of information. However, there is a fundamental difference between the VFMs' communicative style of teaching and the traditional lecture-style of teaching. FE teachers are not only disseminators of information, but they also act as facilitators of class activities, coaches, and managers, and in some cases take on the role of parent or older sibling. For many VFMs, teaching is not a one-way street but an intersection.

Psychologist Reuven Feuerstein suggests that an effective teacher is a mediator and that mediation involves empowering and helping learners to acquire knowledge, skills and strategies they will need in order to progress, to learn more, to tackle problems and to function effectively in a particular culture (Feuerstein, 1997). Mediation is also concerned with the interaction between the mediator and the learner, considering the learner as an active participant in the process of learning. So far, mediation parallels the way many FE teachers try to conduct their classes. A teacher can mediate in many different ways. Feuerstein identifies some key features essential for learning tasks:

1. significance of learning tasks
2. shared intention
3. a sense of competence
4. goal setting
5. challenges and desire to achieve goals
6. a belief in positive outcomes
7. sharing
8. individuality and uniqueness

9. a sense of belonging to a community and culture

The teacher must have a clear intention, which is understood and reciprocated by the students. In order to better understand significance and shared intention, teachers should ask themselves these questions (Williams & Burden, 1997):

- *What are my reasons for selecting a particular activity for my learners?*
- *What significance does that activity hold for these learners personally or in a wider cultural sense?*
- *How can I help the learners to perceive this significance?*
- *How can I introduce the activity to the learners in a way that conveys clearly what I want them to do and why?*
- *How can I ensure that the learners are ready, willing and able to attempt the task?*

Significance of learning tasks and shared intention between teacher and learners will not alone make the learning experience more successful. Point number 3 enhances the significance and strength of the learning experience for both teachers and learners.

A sense of competence implies a feeling of capability in successfully coping with any particular task. To instill this sense in learners, teachers can encourage and increase self-esteem, self confidence and feelings of "*I can*" or "*I am capable of doing this.*" For FE, this means a lot of positive comments and encouragement from the teacher. Williams and Burden add that "there is a strong relationship between having a positive self-image and performing well on learning tasks" (1997, p. 72).

Setting goals refers to the students' abilities to individually set realistic short-term and long-term goals and to plan ways of achieving them; an absence of goals can lead to aimlessness or apathy about learning English. Research suggests that children who set goals in any learning activity are more likely to achieve those goals than ones set for them by somebody else (van Werkhoven, 1990). Goals can be as simple as asking students to write *How many English words can I learn this week* or *How many journal pages can I write this semester*? or *By the end of this semester I want to....*or *This week, I hope to....* Teachers can also emphasize goal setting for students who have difficulties coming to class regularly.

Feuerstein's factors of mediation offer excellent ideas for teachers of any subject; however, one important and very essential point is missing--teachers need to believe that all of their learners are capable of succeeding and will succeed. If teachers do not believe this, it will be difficult to instill any sense of accomplishment and competency in students. Expect success!

In conclusion, I will touch on some particular challenges that face Japanese students learning English. By being aware of these constraints, teachers may be better equipped to counteract potential classroom or student problems.

Challenges Faced by AU Students

Lack of understanding

If a student understands little or none of the language being used in class, frustration will likely set in. FE students may express their frustration by speaking Japanese, saying nothing, not coming to class, or just sitting or sleeping in their chairs waiting for the 45 minutes to pass. Thus, teachers who do not assess their students at the beginning of the school year may risk making their lessons too difficult or too easy. Administering a variety of needs analyses and self-assessments soon after the first semester begins and throughout the semester can help instructors find out what their students know. Self-assessments can take the form of face-to-face interviews between teacher and student and/or weekly assessment summaries in which students write about their week's progress and challenges. As stated above, teachers can also assess students by integrating both structured and less-structured, free-form activities. Activities such as group presentations in which students have to do research without the teacher's assistance and with little instruction can show how resourceful students are and how capable they are of tolerating ambiguity.

Negative Attitudes

Students may have negative attitudes in the FE classroom because they do not like the subject, the classroom environment, or fear looking or sounding foolish in front of their peers. Teachers can counteract negative attitudes in the classroom by maintaining a warm and friendly attitude, giving positive feedback when students make an attempt to participate, and seating students with peers whom they feel comfortable with. When students grasp a concept or language function they have been studying, instructors may want to stay on it before moving to new material--this will build students' feelings of accomplishment and confidence.

Counteracting fatigue

Fatigue is often brought on by students' busy social and academic responsibilities and long commutes. Such realities are important for the VFM to take into consideration when creating activities and schedules for the FE semesters. VFMs may consider limiting homework to a weekly or twice-weekly 30-minute assignment and suggesting that students make use of their commute time by reviewing the day's lesson.

Student interest in learning English

Not all FE students are motivated to learn English or have clear personal language-learning goals. Instructors may have a handful of students enrolled in FE because it is a graduation requirement. Instructors can try encouraging such students by pairing them with highly motivated students and validating them regularly--even if the validation is only for attending class. When monitoring group or pair activities, unmotivated students may benefit from individual teacher attention and validation. Establishing a friendly working relationship with the least motivated students may be a venue for such students to find other worthwhile reasons to attend FE.

Conclusion

The Japanese word for teacher is *sensei* and is written with the Chinese characters meaning "before" and "to live." A *sensei* is someone who has knowledge because of his/her life and educational experience and is able to pass on this knowledge and experience to others. Experienced VFMs are *sensei* too, and in the spirit of *sensei*, it is my hope that an awareness of *amae*, mindfulness, communication strategies, and mediation will help to provide a foundation for future VFMs in their teaching. With a basic understanding of the role that psychology plays in teaching and learning, perhaps interaction between VFMs and FE students will be enhanced both inside of and beyond the classroom walls.

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